

# The Yak

# Newsletter of the Fraser South Rhododendron Society

Volume 18 Number 11 November 2005



Fraser South Rhododendron Society  
is a chapter of the  
American Rhododendron Society

Meetings are held at 7:30 p.m. on the  
third Wednesday of each month at:  
United Church Hall  
5673 - 200th Street  
Langley BC

[www.flounder.ca/FraserSouth](http://www.flounder.ca/FraserSouth)

## 2005 Officers

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Les Clay - 2<sup>nd</sup> yr  
Colleen Forster - 1<sup>st</sup> yr

Membership: Wenonah March

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This Month's Meeting : Wednesday, November 16, 2005

Speakers: Don Martyn

Topic: Magnolias

Companion Plants: Colleen Forster

Show and Tell: Vern Finley

Plant Sales: Dave Shantz

## Quick Hits



### Christmas is coming

Time to fatten up the festive penguin ... or perhaps not. But in any event, our Annual Christmas Potluck Dinner is fast approaching. Because of the vagaries of the Gregorian calendar, the third Wednesday falls perilously close to Christmas this year. Therefore, this year's Potluck Dinner will be held on the second Wednesday of December, Wednesday, December 14<sup>th</sup>.



### Notes and Queries

Has anyone heard of buffered poly(lignosulfate)? That's my question of the month. Check page 6 for more details on what it is and why I want to know. And if you have a question you would like to send out to the general membership, anything - lost rhodo hybrids, why they don't make decent garden forks anymore - or, better yet, answers to someone else's question, let me know and I will post them each month in Notes and Queries



From the President

## WHAT IS MY GARDEN SAYING?

The artist's loft on the top floor of the elevated, architecturally-designed house was resplendent with a priceless view overlooking the quaint village of Nailsworth, near Stroud. We were touring in the Cotswolds while enjoying the gracious hospitality of shirttail relatives. Distant cousin Pauline, is an artist with a gift for expressionistic scenes using oils or acrylics. From the loft window we viewed the panoramic countryside. The easel held her current project – an oil painting picturing the receding hillside as a backdrop for a church nestled in the steep valley between undulating hills on the edge of the tiny town. The morning sun reflected off the unique stone church building, constructed of well preserved yellow-tan Cotswold stones secured from a local quarry. The church's classic architecture declared its 17<sup>th</sup> Century origin. From our vantage point the building was framed by an impeccably groomed cemetery meandering around the property. We were told the church is still regularly used for worship. Its attractive ambience summoned us to attend. The state of the cemetery gave evidence of continuous diligent care over many decades. It was a delight to see, and an enhancement to the sprawling landscape.

Cemeteries are like history books, complete with names and dates. Tombstones may include epitaphs of pithy sayings, or verses of Holy Scripture. Then there is the wry wit, as of the hypochondriac who announced for the entire world to read, "I told you I was sick." Cemeteries and churches can also be seen as repositories of art. Sculptures abound in both places, usually in keeping with religious themes. Gardens and flowers contribute varied textures and splashes of vibrant colors as from an artist's palette.

While the quality of the gardens in this particular church yard in Nailsworth was peerless, the practice of conjoining cemeteries with attendant church gardens is apparently a national phenomenon. Why are so many churches in England enhanced by cemeteries and gardens? Did the English introduce this practice to the world? And, why do we see this so rarely in our corner of the globe? Our churches are impoverished in comparison, bereft of both history and art. Municipal cemeteries seem colder, starker, and quite impersonal.

During our stay at a B&B in Copthorne, near Crawley in Sussex, our host invited us to worship with him at the local Anglican Church. As we neared the church property his level of nervous excitement was palpable. It seemed Don had a vested interest in the congregation, and the adjoining cemetery. His wife had passed away just months earlier and in her memory he had committed himself to the task of caring for the church gardens. The gardens included a cemetery extending throughout the two acres of churchyard. For Don it meant working at least 4 hours each week cutting and trimming the grass. He did so without complaint, though always on the lookout for others to assist with heavier garden tasks. After all, at eighty years of age he was not as capable as earlier in life.

Don had a lifetime of gardening behind him, mostly at his home in partnership with his wife of more than 50 years, but he understood the symbiotic relationship of the gardens to the church. Churches, like individuals, families, neighborhoods, or rhodo societies, have personalities. Don understood that well-kept grounds reflect well on the Church and the community, a fact that goes beyond grieving for his wife.

We see few cemeteries connected to churchyards in Canada. Maybe it is not the tradition here. Or, it may be considered too costly either in establishing the cemetery and gardens or in the maintenance programs necessitated by them. Regardless, we are the poorer for the way we cede our responsibility to city cemeteries and parks departments. Gardens are more than collections of plants. Whether beside a church, within a cemetery, or on home property, gardens show the tangible efforts of real people. Of course we saw many examples of woefully neglected churchyards that reflected poorly on the people and property. With an aging population it becomes increasingly difficult to get capable and physically able gardeners to give of their time and talents to the church. We often find it a struggle to keep up our own home gardens.

But just as landscaping reveals the skill, diligence, and personality of the homeowner and others within the home, so also, the character of the congregation is revealed in the church property. I might further note that there is a theological significance to the way we respect our environment. Perhaps that is an overriding message portrayed by the churches at Nailsworth and Copthorne.

The meaningfulness of the worship services we attended in England was comparable to the diligent attention to the surrounding gardens. Often each pursuit beckoned the visitor to "stay awhile." There seemed to be a correlation between attentive interpersonal relationships in the church building and the aura of awe and respect in the manicured churchyard. Dutiful attention to each was discernible and basic to the personality of the congregation. I wonder what dimensions of personality my garden reveals.

*Bobby Ogdon*



From the Editor

## This Month: :

This month Don Martyn will give us a presentation on Magnolias.

## Last Month:

Last month was the official dog and pony show from the FSRS contingent of those who travelled to Yunnan, China, last spring. We had four computers, one slide projector, one digital projector, five participants, and a quasi-fashion show. And most of all, we had fun. We (collectively, as was appropriate) spoke on everything from ethnic minorities, to farm vehicles, to hot air ballooning in central China. Garth, good school teacher that he is, provided the structure with maps and lists of participants. Mary showed us the beauty with her pre-programmed presentation - with music, no less - of the mountains, the rivers and other scenic views. Sean and I concentrated on life as it is lived by the Chinese inhabitants of the small towns we travelled through: their culture, their dress, their transportation, their housing, their farming techniques. And Dalen showed slides of his and Lori's travels in the river valleys of Central China. Truthfully, there was hardly a rhodie picture to be seen, but that was all part of the master plan. We were saving them for Garth's presentation in February.

## Next Month:

Our next meeting will be a week ahead of schedule, on Wednesday, December 14<sup>th</sup>. The vagaries of the calendar meant that this year the third Wednesday will be December 21<sup>st</sup>, which everyone agreed was a little too close to Christmas to ensure maximum participation in our Annual Festive Potluck Dinner. Don't forget, we start a bit earlier than usual - so plan to arrive about 6:30pm, or even earlier if you would like to help set up.

Bring a cup, plate and eating utensils. And don't forget a gift under \$10.00 for the gift exchange. Karen Linton will be contacting members to coordinate the potluck contributions, and Colleen Forster will organize the festive activities.

## Notes:

### KITCHEN DUTIES

Cherry Groves has forwarded the following fall schedule for the Coffee and Calories Brigade:

November                      Lori Bayes, Patti Bale, Joan McGiveron

And many thanks to last month's contributors, Mary-Anne Berg, Nancy Moore, et al. I know there were more people who contributed to all those wonderful treats - I just don't know who they were. But thank you to all the anonymous helpers and shy violets, you are the stalwarts who make our group the success that it is.

### PROVEN PERFORMERS

One of the aims of the American Rhododendron Society on the whole, as well as all of its constituent parts, is to increase the level of awareness about, and appreciation of, rhododendrons by the general public. To this end the ARS has developed their Proven Performers category. This comprises any rhododendron (hybrid or species, registered or unregistered, rhododendron or azalea, lepidote or elepidote) which the members of a Chapter feel is particularly appropriate in terms of attractiveness, ease of culture, and availability for the geographic area of that Chapter. Please come to the November meeting armed with a list of 5 rhodos you feel should be included in the list.

### MEMBERSHIP

December 1<sup>st</sup> is the ARS deadline for memberships. Our internal Chapter deadline is November 20<sup>th</sup>. Anyone who has not completed their enrolment form and handed it in with their membership fee to either Wenonah or Alan March by that date will drop off "The Yak" mailing list and will not receive the winter 2006 issue of the ARS Journal.

### ANNUAL EXECUTIVE AND DIRECTOR ELECTIONS

A reminder that the AGM, with its concomitant election of officers, is coming up in January. Bobby Ogdon will be vacating the President's chair after his 2 year tenure, and Harold Fearing will likewise be leaving, having served for three years as a Director. These positions must be filled. Please consider strengthening your support of our Chapter by participating as a member of the executive or directors. Contact any member of the current executive/directors if you wish to volunteer.

### MEMBER SUPPORT

As members of the FSRS community we would all like to provide every possible support to our fellow members whenever needed. The problem is that sometimes we are unaware of that need. Please remember to contact the President, or indeed any member of the executive or directors, if you are aware of a fellow member who would be buoyed by a get-well card, a note of condolence, or any other token of encouragement during a difficult time.

*Brenda Macdonald*



## Up the Garden Path with House Ferns

At this time of the year, many gardeners like to add new houseplants to their collections to enjoy over the coming winter months. Tender ferns make good houseplants, but there is a lot of conflicting information written about how to care for them. However, with some basic needs met, many ferns are easy to grow.

Indoor ferns need bright light, average to slightly cool room temperatures, even moisture and good relative humidity. Conditions to avoid are direct summer sun, very dry atmospheres, and excessively wet or poorly drained soils. The hardest condition to control is humidity, especially for those who heat their homes with wood burning fireplaces. To combat low humidity, try growing ferns together in groups, or if you have a bright bathroom windowsill, grow them there since the bathroom is likely to have the highest humidity in the house. Ferns can also be set on large trays that contain a layer of small pebbles, sand or perlite. Keep the pebbles moist to help raise humidity in the vicinity of the ferns. However, do not let pots of ferns actually sit in water as this may lead to root rot.

People often ask me about misting their houseplants and while this seems like a good idea, it doesn't have much value because temporary sprays don't raise humidity long enough to be useful. In some cases, hard or cold water may actually cause leaf spotting or damage. It is beneficial, however, to occasionally wash fern foliage by syringing the plants gently with tepid water to remove dust from the leaves.

Boston or Sword Fern (*Nephrolepis exalata bostoniensis*) is an easy fern to grow and the most common fern to be grown as a house plant. In spite of being native to Florida, cultivated Sword Ferns are almost always now referred to as Boston Ferns and I've heard two stories as to how they came to be renamed. One story is that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a particularly attractive Sword Fern variant was found growing in a Massachusetts greenhouse and in time, it became the most popular variety available in the Boston area. The other is that the name reflects the huge numbers of ferns that were shipped to New England at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Victorians

adored ferns and Boston Ferns were especially admired for their ability to tolerate their house conditions.

Typically, Boston Ferns have long, pendulous, dark green leaves that are best seen when plants are grown in hanging baskets or stood on pedestals. However, there are now many varietal selections available. For example, 'Fluffy Ruffles' which is a very pretty plant has shorter leaves with light green, curly leaflets. Whatever the variety, as Boston Ferns grow, they send out rhizomes which can be used for propagation since small plantlets form at the tips of these root-like, spreading stems. Large plants can also be divided by cutting them vertically through the crown, splitting the plant into sections so that each section contains both roots and foliage.



**Boston Fern**  
*Nephrolepis exalata  
bostoniensis*

Maidenhair ferns, (*Adiantum* species) have soft, chartreuse green leaves held upright on shiny black stems, and Button Ferns (*Pellaea rotundifolia*) have small, rounded, button-like leaflets that grow off a central midrib. The low-growing Button Fern is native to New Zealand where it is found growing in rock cracks. Maidenhair Ferns also often grow on porous rocks in the tropics, so both species need potting mixes that drain freely. They also need good relative humidity. These ferns are particularly suitable for fluorescent light gardens. I grow Maidenhair Ferns as companion plants to orchids under lights and often find tiny ferns growing in neighboring orchid pots as the growing conditions are ideal for spore development and growth.



**Maidenhair Fern**  
*Adiantum pedatum*

*continued on page 5*

Success in starting fern spores varies depending on the species of fern. For both Maidenhair and Boston Ferns, simply collect the spores by tapping the spore-bearing fronds onto a piece of white paper, or putting pieces of these fronds in a paper bag where they can be collected. Dust the collected spores across the surface of a flat filled with a mixture of equal parts moistened peat moss and sand (or perlite), then cover the flat with a pane of glass or plastic. Keep the flat in an area where it receives some light, but avoid direct sun. Check to make sure the growing mix stays slightly moist at all times. With luck, you will see a green bit of growth on the surface of the peat, eventually followed by small fern plants. The entire process can be a lengthy one, taking several months. Once the small ferns are big enough to handle, they should be hardened off gradually by increasing the light levels and allowing the young plants to be acclimated to more temperature variation. Then, they can be teased out of the peat moss and potted up in small pots.



Cretan Brake Fern  
*Pteris cretica*

This fern is often included in “dish” gardens where several species of plants are grown together in the same pot.



Holly Fern  
*Cyrtomium falcatum*

The Bird’s Nest Fern (*Asplenium nidus*) is another beautiful, easy to grow species with foliage that grows from a central crown, in a rosette pattern. The bright green, strap-like leaves grow straight up from a central growing point located just at the top of the soil. The usual growing recommendations apply to Bird’s Nest Ferns with one additional warning: do not let water collect in the centre of the crown (where the leaves

The Table or Brake Fern (*Pteris cretica*) is also easy to grow from spores. Table Ferns look delicate, but they are really fairly tough. There are many varieties of this fern available including variegated forms which have white margins along the leaf edges. The fronds grow from a central crown and can reach between 10 to 12 inches in height.

As long as they have ample water and good drainage, Holly Ferns (*Cyrtomium falcatum*) are also easy to grow. Holly Ferns have deep, glossy green fronds, with leaflets shaped somewhat like those of hollies, but without the spines. Both the Table Fern and the Holly Fern are happiest when grown in relatively cool homes.

arise from the ground) as this can cause the growing point to rot.

Staghorn Ferns (*Platycerium bifurcatum*) are more challenging to grow than the above species, but are worth the effort. These epiphytes are native to tropical rainforests where they grow by attaching themselves to trees by means of specialized holdfast fronds that wrap themselves around the bark. They do not parasitize their hosts, but use them strictly for support. Other fronds grow outwards from the holdfasts and then split into “prongs” reminiscent of the way stag horns split into smaller pieces at their tips. In cultivation, we often grow Staghorn Ferns on pieces of wood so that the holdfasts wrap themselves around pieces of bark, but they can also be grown in a traditional pot, with growing media, where the holdfasts grow by spreading out over the growing mix. Pots for Staghorn Ferns should be shallow and wide to accommodate the growth habit. Because of their coarse texture, I’d describe Staghorn Ferns as handsome rather than pretty. Their blue-green foliage is slightly downy, and like many plants with “fuzzy” leaves, the foliage may get spotted with water if misted.



Birds Nest Fern  
*Asplenium nidus*



Staghorn Fern  
*Platycerium bifurcatum*

Rabbit’s Foot Ferns (*Davallia canariensis*) are a bit fussy, but when they are well grown, they are beautiful plants. They get their common name from the furry-looking rhizomes that grow just on top of the soil surface. New plantlets form at the tips of the rhizomes, and these can be propagated in the spring by dividing them off the mother plant. The plants have fine-textured, soft fronds, very typically “fernish” in appearance. They do not tolerate hot drafts or direct summer sun at all, and good relative humidity is a must for this species. As well, the potting mixture for Rabbit’s Foot Ferns should be very porous so that there is good drainage. Rabbit’s Foot Ferns are well suited to being grown in baskets because of the cascading foliage.

If you’ve got the right conditions, think about adding some ferns to your houseplant collections. The lovely foliage adds an elegant touch to any décor.

*Norma Senn*

## Notes and Queries



[www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/](http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/)

This marvelous website is a most remarkable repository of information and images of all aspects of things botanical.

However, be warned. There is something profoundly hypnotic about drifting from linked site to linked site, absorbing tidbits of information on how a species of South American ant uses toxins to develop patches of monoculture amidst the exceptional diversity of the Amazonian rainforest, or the use of bracken fern as a substitute for peat moss (these from the incredibly eclectic UBC Botanical Garden Weblog ([www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/weblog/](http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/weblog/)); or reviewing the life and botanical illustrations of a Joseph Prestele housed in the Botanical Art category ([www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/weblog/cat\\_botanical\\_art.php](http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/weblog/cat_botanical_art.php)); or surveying the outstanding images within Botany Photo of the Day ([www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/potd/](http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/potd/)), a “separate but equal” blog with its own fascinating network of connections.



I am now beginning to understand the resistance and despair voiced by many long-time rhododendron lovers at the dismissal of their beloved Balfourian Classification, because while I wasn't watching, someone went and re-arranged all the plant “families” I had known and loved.

This startling discovery was occasioned by a little investigating I was doing in relation to Don Martyn's upcoming talk on Magnolias. I wanted to add a few words about the Magnolia family to the brief notification about this month's program. I remembered that the Royal Horticultural Society has a “Rhododendron, Camellia, and Magnolia” group so I wanted to see how closely related the three families were.

The botany taxonomy course I took (well, yes, it was more than a few years ago) used the metaphor of a sort of modified cactus, named after Charles Edwin Bessey, a professor of botany at the University of Nebraska in the early 1900's, to diagram plant evolution. Bessey pictured the relationship of the various families of plants as a sort of series of connected lumps, much like a profoundly stressed Prickly Pear, rather than the linear ladder of Aristotle or the uneasy network (where was the forward motion to that ultimate creation - Man?) proposed by the Linneans.

The point is, that not only were these classification systems – the Balfourian and the Besseyan – the ones we first learned, they made sense. Of course they made sense because they were primarily based on morphological characteristics, things we could see with our eyes, or at the very least with our microscopes. It is basically the duck method of botanical classification: if it looks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck ...

It was then only a very small leap from morphologically based groupings to a morphologically based theory of phylogeny or evolutionary history. After all, if what we have now is a duck, it seems most likely that its parent was, at the very least, duck-like.

And, like Balfour's “series” the Besseyan/Cronquist/Eames/Reeder “families” were, for the most part, so tidy. The parts that weren't tidy we didn't hear about, which was just fine because they rarely concerned horticultural material anyway.

What we did hear about was that if the plant you were looking at had opposite and entire (smooth-edged) leaves, stems with swollen nodes, perfect (with both male and female parts) flowers with usually 5-merous petals that had “pinked” or scalloped edges and were attached above the ovary, you could be fairly confident that what you were looking at was a member of the Caryophyllaceae or Carnation family.

However I found, as I tried to do a little research about where the Magnolia family fit into the scheme of things, that the ground had shifted. There was little discussion about the plant families I had learned about, with their lovely euphonious names: Caryophyllaceae - the Pink family, Curcubitaceae - the Cucumber family, Ranunculaceae - the Buttercup family, and my favourite, Zingiberaceae - the Ginger family. Instead there were pages devoted to “paleodicots”, “basal eudicots”, “eurosids” and “euasterids II”.

Of course it wasn't as bad as it first looked. I did find many of my old familiars, they were just buried a little deeper, and reorganized into different groupings much the same way that the Edinburgh revision reorganized the Balfour system. Still it was quite a shock, and one that made me realize that there continues to be quite a chasm between the scientist's need for answers to the “why” and “how” questions, and the gardener's need for answers to the “what is it” question.

And what did I learn? That although the Rhododendron genus (part of the Ericaceae or Heath family) and the Camellia genus (part of the Theaceae or Tea family) are at least on the same side of the tree, the Magnolia family (Magnoliaceae) is apparently an ancient and relatively primitive family, as distant in relationship to the other two as it is to primulas.

So the RHS' Rhodo, Camellia, and Magnolia grouping remains an enigma.

The Query:



Who amongst us hasn't had at least some experience with clay. Not just a clay-based soil, but the genuine article itself – greasy and slick when wet, hard as rock when dry, impervious to a shovel in any season.

Apparently down in Australia they have a product that they routinely use to amend the many veins of clay running through their soil. The chemical name is “buffered poly lignosulfate”, and it works a charm. You mix it up with water, sprinkle it on the clay, and leave it alone for a while. It flocculates the clay, causing it to clump together, and it is this action that allows the clay to be broken up. It is a by-product of the pulp and paper industry so one would think it would be readily available. And it is, if you want it by the tanker car-full to service your oil wells, or combat dust on endless prairie roads. But has anyone heard of a more reasonable consumer-size supply?

*Brenda Macdonald*



## Rhododendrons of Yunnan



This photo by Bill McMillan of Victoria  
Yunnan, China, May, 2005

### **Rhododendron lacteum**

Delavay first found *R. lacteum* in 1884 in north-west Yunnan, where it was growing at 10,500 feet in almost pure stands. It was not introduced into cultivation until George Forrest brought it back in 1910. Usually found in shades of yellow, (although it sometimes shows up in the milk-white colour of its name) it is hardy and free-flowering, even if notoriously prone to sulk. It rarely produces seed, propagation by layering is difficult, and it does not transplant well. Perfect drainage and grafting onto stronger root stock often, but not always, help.

*R. lacteum* grows as a large shrub or small tree, 20 - 25' tall. The blossoms, up to 2" long with an insignificant calyx, are widely campanulate and packed into dense terminal trusses of 15 to 30 flowers. They are sometimes marked with a purple blotch.



This illustration by Lilian Snelling was first published in 1922 in Curtis's Botanical Magazine, from material supplied by Mr. Williams of Caerhays.